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RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1311
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2306
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 0045
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 0054
RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 0055
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RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0139
RUEHMT/AMCONSUL MONTREAL
RUEHQU/AMCONSUL QUEBEC 0004
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SUBJECT: EMBASSY'S MARK TWAIN LITERARY PRIZE HELPS
CONGOLESE WRITERS FIND THEIR VOICE

11. (SBU) Summary: PAS Kinshasa conceived, organized and sponsored the monthly Mark Twain Literary Prize from June to December 2009. Due to the event's enormous popular success, Ambassador has

announced that the contest will be extended for another six-month period. More than 150 short works of fiction were entered into the contest; six monthly winners and two grand prize winners were selected; press coverage of each monthly event was extensive; the program was well received by the public; and the stories themselves have provided important insights into Congolese values and culture. End summary.

12. (SBU) The Mark Twain Literary Prize was launched in June 2009 by PAS Kinshasa. The contest solicited submissions of short works of fiction (10,000 words or less), written in French by Congolese citizens residing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The program's goals were to encourage freedom of expression, support Congolese writers of fiction, promote mutual understanding between the embassy and local population, create a regular event for outreach and press coverage, and develop strong and mutually beneficial relationships with key contacts in the literary and cultural communities. An award of \$500 was given to the best story submitted to the Embassy prior to the 15th of each month. The laureates were selected by a jury including PAO, PDO, and three local dignitaries (a member of the National Assembly who runs a theater group, a prominent literary critic, and a young creative entrepreneur). At the end of six months, a Grand Prize winner was selected from among the monthly laureates and awarded \$1,000 (in the end, the jury could not decide between two excellent stories, so the two writers -- both female -- were given Grand Prize awards).

13. (SBU) The prize was named in honor of Mark Twain because of that writer's imagination, accessibility, and his use of fiction as a medium for both entertainment and social criticism. From the beginning, the prize stimulated an enthusiastic response from local writers. More than 150 stories were received, through e-mail and hard-copy submissions. Some 50-60 people attended each of the six award ceremonies. The announcement of the launching of the prize, as well as each award ceremony, received extensive -- and overwhelmingly positive -- press coverage. PAS Kinshasa commissioned a local graphic design firm to design a poster and bookmarks, using the Congolese colors of blue and gold. The posters were visually striking, creating a memorable brand for the contest. The bookmarks were used to disseminate rules for the prize and remind potential contestants of the deadlines.

14. (SBU) The stories submitted offer insights into various issues

of concern to the local population. Congolese culture is at the same time creative and circumspect. It is sometimes difficult to get local contacts to speak candidly about the most vexing social and political problems, especially when they involve conflicts Qand political problems, especially when they involve conflicts between the Congolese themselves. But through the vehicle of fiction, writers were able to describe the challenges average citizens face in their daily lives, and express frustration with issues such as corruption or Sexual- and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV).

15. (SBU) Certain themes were emphasized in many stories. These themes included: SGBV and other women's issues, the clash of cultures (either between Africa and the West, or within tribal and ethnic groups), and the stresses of daily life in the DRC. Although only a handful of women submitted stories, SGBV and other women's issues were prominently featured. One of the Grand Prize stories, "Le Mortier" (The Mortar), described a young urban woman's acceptance of traditional marriage and village life. The other Grand Prize winner, "Moi et Mon Cheveu," (Me and My Hair) was an ironic study of the importance of physical appearance for women in Congolese culture. Sexual and Gender Based Violence was addressed explicitly by several stories, and some of the underlying cultural biases against women that allow such a problem to persist in the DRC were illustrated, both explicitly and implicitly. Even some stories that were meant to be critical of SGBV demonstrated deep-rooted sexual biases on the part of the male writers. The fact that only a few of the more than 150 stories submitted were from female writers points to the obstacles faced by women in Congolese society.

16. (SBU) Several stories address Congolese relations with the West. One story, the first monthly prize winner, described how a street kid's life was changed by a chance interaction with a rich Westerner. Other stories described ambiguous feelings toward the international community, life in Europe and the diaspora community. Many of the stories discussing changes in fortune are like fables. Events are adventitious, almost random, expressing the belief that life is beyond their control, and can change dramatically in an instant.

17. (SBU) Another prominent theme in many of the stories is the stress of daily life. They describe difficulties in transportation and communication, lack of economic opportunities, corruption and cruelty. One submission tells the story of a young college girl whose professor threatens to fail her unless she sleeps with him. Another story describes the daily nightmare of riding in a public bus in Kinshasa. Other stories describe traditional village life with scenes evoking romantic pastoralism and often adapting the style and tone of traditional folk tales. Other social issues discussed include the difficulties of inter-tribal marriage, the social ostracism experienced by albinos and the handicapped, and the stress of severe economic pressures on family life.

18. (SBU) At what was supposed to be the final awards ceremony on December 9, the ambassador announced that the Mark Twain Prize would be extended for another six months. This announcement was met with great enthusiasm from the audience. In the future, PAS hopes to extend the reach of the Mark Twain Prize and solicit more stories from provincial areas. The six winning stories will be published in both French and English versions and distributed free of charge to participants, jury members and select contacts. And PAS Kinshasa is exploring the possibility of writers' workshops and other supporting programs to further develop the community that has formed around the Mark Twain Prize.

19. (SBU) Comment: The Mark Twain Prize can be judged a success by several measures. We believe the level of participation and the positive feelings generated by the program have helped many Congolese better appreciate American culture and the U.S. Embassy. Press coverage of monthly events announcing winners has been widespread and overwhelmingly positive. Winners, as well as jury members and other participants, have formed a community -- now they actively promote the prize and through it, the embassy. And the Qactively promote the prize and through it, the embassy. And the stories themselves are rich cultural documents. By offering the Congolese a platform through which they could express themselves, using the example of a great American writer as inspiration, PAS Kinshasa was able to support local culture, promote American values, and disseminate a positive image of the U.S. presence in the DRC. Writers and their literary creations have historically been a strong force for change in countries throughout the world. In Congo, where there are few paths to publication, writers are finding their voice, with the help of the embassy. End comment.

